

Upper Secondary Education in Japan

The role of upper secondary education in Japan is to “provide higher general education and specialized education according to students’ mental and physical development on the foundation of the lower secondary education” (*School Education Act Article 50*). It therefore plays a vital and crucial role in determining the future courses of individuals and in distributing the future work force into society. Japan’s upper secondary education underwent a quantitative growth in the twentieth century and tried to answer the needs of people and businesses by diversifying methods of reform. This paper mainly focuses on high schools, which form the main force of upper secondary education, taking a look at their development through history as well as the challenges they face.

Japan’s upper secondary education can be grouped as presented in the table below¹:

Category of upper secondary schools	Number of schools	Number of students
High Schools (<i>Koto-gakko</i>)		
(1) general courses, specialized courses and integrated courses (full day / part-time courses)	(1) 5,060	(1) 3,557,000
(2) general courses, specialized and integrated courses (correspondence courses)	(2) 210	(2) 188,251
Latter 3years of Secondary Education Schools (<i>Chuto-kyoiku-gakko, Koki-katei</i>)	49	10,806
Upper Secondary Dept. of Special Need School (<i>Tokubetu-shien-gakko Kotobu</i>)	847	59,696
Upper Secondary Courses in Specialized Training Colleges (<i>Senshu-gakko Koto-katei</i>)	459	38,349
Former 3 years of Technical Colleges (<i>Koto-senmon-gakko</i>)	58*	34,053*

data from the 2011 school year, *data from the 2010 school year

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http://www.mext.go.jp/component/b_menu/other/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2012/02/06/1315583_2.pdf
[f; http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/NewList.do?tid=000001011528.](http://www.e-stat.go.jp/SG1/estat/NewList.do?tid=000001011528)

Those who have completed nine-year compulsory education may go on to one of the upper secondary schools above. Normally, students must take entrance examinations to enter upper secondary schools².

Regarding high schools, there are full-day courses, part-time, and correspondence courses. Full-day courses last three years, while both part-time and correspondence courses last three years or more. The last two courses are mainly intended for young workers who wish to pursue their upper secondary studies in a flexible manner in accordance with their own needs. All these courses lead to a high school diploma³.

In terms of the contents of the learning provided, the high school courses may also be classified into three categories: (1) general, (2) specialized (former vocational), and (3) integrated courses. (1) General courses provide mainly general education suited to the needs of both those who wish to advance to higher education and those who are going to get a job but have chosen no specific vocational area. (2) Specialized courses are mainly intended to provide vocational or other specialized education for those students who have chosen a particular vocational or specialty area as their future career. These courses may be further classified into the following: agriculture, industry, commerce, fishery, home economics, nursing, science-mathematics, physical education, music, art, English language and other courses. (3) Integrated courses were introduced in 1994. These courses offer a wide variety of subject areas and subjects from both the general and the specialized courses, in order to adequately satisfy students' diverse interests, abilities and aptitudes, future career plans, etc.⁴

The upper secondary school enrollment rate currently stands at more than 98% (MEXT 2009, of which 94% receive a full-time education); and though it is not mandatory, most members of the same generation receive education for this stage. This is one of the highest rate of enrollment, even in comparison to other countries. Among the six main developed countries, Japan takes second place to Korea with its 99.9%. Others are Germany's 96.0%, of which 85.8% are in a full-time course, France's 95.4%, of which 87.3% are in a full-time course, America's 90.3%, and the UK's 89.3%, of which 78.0% are in a full-time course⁵.

² MEXT(2012), <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/introduction/1303952.htm>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵

MEXT(2011), http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/09/27/1299178_01.pdf.

1. Development of Upper Secondary Education in Japan

1-1. Post-War Education Reform and the Introduction of New High Schools

The spread of upper secondary education in Japan began from the educational reform after World War II, when the system of 6-3-3-4 was introduced and compulsory education was extended to three years of lower secondary education. High schools were launched in 1948 with the idea that they would be open to all who wished for higher education after nine years of compulsory education.

High schools (*koto-gakko*) in the pre-war education system were male-only preparatory institutions to universities and were categorized under tertiary education. In the process of the post-war reform, these high schools were absorbed into the liberal arts courses of postwar national universities. Therefore they have no continuity with the new high schools. The seed of post-war high schools came from three pre-existing schools: pre-war middle schools (male-only general education schools and the only path to pre-war high schools), girls high schools (female-only general upper secondary education schools), and vocational schools (sex-separated).

In the GHQ's original plans for new high schools, each school district was to have one high school, which would be accessible to all adolescents in the district and offer coeducation based on everyone's future course. Afterward these points came to be called the *Three Principles of High School Education* (*Koko San Gensoku*: small school district, comprehensive education, and coeducation) and were used as the slogan for a movement that demanded "high schools for all" in the 1960-70s. However of the three, only the principle of coeducation was almost realized. As for the other two, although half of all high schools carried them out under the leadership of GHQ just after the war, they were unrealized according to the real supply and demand of upper secondary education in local communities⁶.

Looking to the quantitative development, Japan's high school enrollment rate was 40% in 1950, 70% in 1960, and more than 80% in 1970. It then rose steadily until it reached 90 % in 1984⁷.

⁶ Hishimura, Y. (1995).

⁷ MEXT(2011),

http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/09/27/1299178_01.pdf.

The expansion of high schools in Japan was excelled by its great economic growth. In this period, high school graduates were employed by a wide range of industries and formed the mid-level work force, supporting economic growth. As a result, high school vocational education courses were especially expanded from the late 1950s to the 60s. For example, courses that covered the secondary sector of industry such as manufacturing, machinery, electricity, chemistry, architecture, and civil engineering were established or developed to meet the needs of the industrial world⁸.

In the 1950s, upper secondary education opportunities for working youth who graduated from junior high schools were opened. First, part-time night courses were increased, and education and training in enterprises or factories were also accredited as high school credits. The correspondence education system of high schools was also put into practice locally and it was after 1961 that this system came to cover wider areas of the country by broadcasting measures. In addition, 1962 saw the foundation of five-year technical colleges, the first three years of which covered upper secondary education⁹.

1-2. Drastic Increase in Enrollment Rates and Its Effects

In the mid-60s when the first post-war baby boomers reached high school age, building more high schools became the main task of educational policies. To upgrade both the quantity and quality of high school education, the central government gave a tax allocation grant to local governments. The establishment of private institutions was also encouraged and they bore an important role in Japan's upper secondary education. In this period, private high schools grew to make up a fourth of the total educational facilities, while they accepted a third of high school students in the country.

The rapid increase in enrollment rates lead to a change in the nature of high schools. In the early days of post-war high schools, when the enrollment rate was at around 40%, students in both general and vocational courses were highly motivated and competent enough to absorb the education. However, when enrollment rates rose to be over 70%, the large influx of students of all academic levels in high schools caused arguments about competence levels for entering high schools. The intensifying competition for high school advancement that started at this period changed the nature of secondary education even further.

⁸ Hishimura (1995) *op.cit.*.

⁹ *Ibid.*

In 1966, the Central Education Council submitted the report “Expansion of Providing Upper Secondary Education”¹⁰ which suggested taking measures so that every citizen could receive upper secondary education in any form. It reorganized the high school curriculum to fit students’ aptitudes, abilities and career choices. According to the above report and demand from the industrial world, there was a diversification and subdivision of vocational courses. The newly organized courses that subdivided from agriculture, industry, commerce, fishery, and home economics included forest civil engineering, metallurgical technology, electrical technology, hygiene engineering, architectural sciences, accounting, business, trade, fishing management, cooking, clothing design, etc. From the mid-60s to mid-70s, these sub-divided courses counted from 89 to 252¹¹.

Until the early 1970s, as the social demand for high school graduates were high, vocational high schools were valued as a future path for graduates of compulsory education. However, when the high school enrollment rate reached its peak, and the university enrollment rate gradually increased, vocational courses in high schools inevitably became associated with a lower social status, because those who sought a direct path to universities rushed to general high schools. From the 1970s onward, vocational schools suffered serious problems such as unwilling enrollment and dropping out by students who gave up on going to general high schools because of a lack of academic achievement.

By the way, a problem shared with East Asian countries, where higher academic degrees are traditionally valued, is that vocational education has come to be looked down upon regardless of its importance. Japan, with its efforts to expand vocational training courses during the post war economic growth, is no exception. Even with the path to universities open to vocational high school graduates now, the fact that of the total enrollment population of the upper secondary level, almost 30% enroll in vocational courses while the remaining 70% enroll in general courses can be seen as proof¹².

As a whole, Japan’s rising high school enrollment rates and intensified competition for entrance examinations in the 70s-80s brought about the following problems in secondary education¹³:

¹⁰ Ministry of Education (1966),
http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/old_chukyo/old_chukyo_index/toushin/1309489.htm.

¹¹ Ishimine, C., “Development of Upper Secondary Vocational Education”, Shimizu, K., Fujida, T. and Study Group on High School Education (2008).

¹² MEXT(2011),
http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/09/27/1299178_01.pdf.

¹³ Regarding the profile of Japanese high schools in this period, see: Rohlen, T. P. (1983).

- (1) Both lower and upper secondary education inclined toward preparation for entrance exams, and high schools were ranked by the academic achievement of enrolled students or by how many of them moved on to famous universities;
- (2) Accordingly, students bearing academic and/or behavioral problems ended up in lower-ranked high schools, including vocational schools;
- (3) Excess levels of stress, described as “entrance exam war/hell”, suffered healthy juvenile development, leading to various problems such as student apathy, violence, bullying, truancy and dropping out.

2. Reform of High School Education from 70s to 90s

In the 70s to 90s, the “High School Reform” debates on the problems detailed above were actively discussed. The reports from the Central Education Council (1971), the Meeting of Prefectural Education Chiefs, High School Development Division (1978), Ad Hoc Council of Education (1985), and the Central Education Council (1991, 1993, and 1997) suggested the following basic plans for high school reform. Not only the councils of central and local governments but also teachers themselves, in collaboration with researchers in universities, local educational institutes, teachers’ unions, etc., undertook research to improve education at suffering schools to meet the real needs of adolescent students.

The main reform proposals carried out during this period were: (1) integration of lower and upper secondary education into 6-year schools and (2) making curriculum and education methods more flexible, such as by introducing of integrated courses, implementing the school credit system, and organizing new distinctive courses in both general and vocational high schools.

The recommendations submitted by the Central Education Council in the early 90s in particular were examined and adjusted by the prefectural governments, and there was a dramatic reorganization of upper secondary institutions. In the background of this reform were the diversification of high school students’ profiles and their needs under post-economic growth, as well as the decrease of the student population with the declining birthrates. New institutions and courses that appeared during this period are detailed below:

• Introduction of unified lower and upper secondary education

In the midst of the debates on universal high school education, public lower and upper unified

secondary education school systems continued to be the main subject of discussion. It must be mentioned that the roots of 6-year unified secondary education were some private schools located in large cities such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kobe. These schools provided 6-year unified curriculum to realize qualified secondary education, especially for success in university entrance exams. In contrast, the 6-year secondary education school system proposed in this reform was not an education for the elite minority, but was envisaged as an option for fulfilling the objective of secondary education for the public. This plan was put into practice in 1999 after the submission of a recommendation by the Central Education Council in 1997¹⁴.

In Japan, the founding bodies of public lower secondary schools are the municipal governments, while public upper secondary schools are established by the prefectural governments. As a result, there are three types of unified secondary school.

(1) Single entity: a single school founded by the same founder, sharing the same campus and running the lower course and upper course. In other words, this is the only type that qualifies as “6-year secondary education schools” in the table at the beginning of this paper.

(2) Affiliation and/or attachment: two schools founded by the same founder but on different campuses work together. This includes a high school and its affiliated junior high school in the neighborhood.

(3) Cooperative: more than one pre-existing municipal junior high school and prefectural high school cooperate on matters such as curriculum and social exchange on both the student and teacher levels. The duration of this cooperation will be dependent on the results.

In each case there are no academic examinations for high school entrance and one can enter high school with simple enrollment papers and an applicant screening. As of 2010, schools running on the lower and upper unified secondary education system are (1) 48 single-entity schools, (2) 273 affiliated and/or attached schools, and (3) 82 cooperating schools.¹⁵

• **Implementation of the Credit System in High Schools**

Excluding a short period just after World War II, Japanese high schools adopted the grade system. In the grade system, the curriculum for each academic year (grade) is often based on a combination of compulsory subjects and selective required subjects in accordance with

¹⁴ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/ikkan/4/970601.htm.

¹⁵ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/ikkan/main5_a2.htm.

individual future career and aptitude. It is common for curriculum to branch off to advancement courses and employment courses, with advancement courses further diverging to sciences and humanities.

In contrast, the school credit system that does not use a grade-based framework aimed for diversification and individualization of learning by matching students' own intention, aptitudes, and study pace. Although this system is not bound by academic years, there is still a limit on total years of registration. This credit system was established in 1988 through part-time night courses and correspondence courses, but became available in full-time courses in 1993. As of 2010, the number of schools that take the credit system had increased to 928, of which 533 schools are full-time.¹⁶

• **The Introduction of Integrated Courses**

As mentioned above, integrated high school courses were introduced in 1994. They were defined as “courses where one can build up one’s own curriculum comprehensively by selecting learning contents from both general education and specialized education.” One characteristic of this course is that students can plan their future at their own pace without having to decide between advancement and employment at the time of their enrollment. The credit system is naturally adopted here. Integrated courses also offer a compulsory subject on career education labeled as “industrial society and humanity” in the first year of study.

Examples of subject areas offered at integrated courses are as follows:

- Areas like healthcare and welfare / human welfare / welfare in community life;
- Areas like international culture / regional and international studies / social studies;
- Areas like sports / sports and culture;
- Areas like figurative arts / humanity and fine arts;
- Areas like nature and environment / environmental science;
- Areas like information technology / IT business.

The number of schools offering integrated courses showed a steady increase to 349 in 2010¹⁷.

• **Renaming “Vocational High School” to “Specialized High School”**

From 1995 onwards “vocational high schools/courses” were renamed “specialized high

¹⁶ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/kaikaku/seido/04033102.htm.

¹⁷ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/kaikaku/seido/04033101.htm.

schools/courses” in order to present a more appealing image of vocational education¹⁸.

The specialized courses described here are defined as “the first educational step in fostering creative specialists of the future.” In this context, specialized education is considered one of the links of life-long learning and training. To fulfill this definition, original vocational high schools were streamlined and the curricula and facilities were renewed. At the same time, various paths to universities were newly created, such as the recommendation system, acknowledgement of qualifications and credits, and providing special exams for specialized high school students. With the effect of such measures, upper secondary vocational schools are gradually overturning the negative reputation they bore as gathering places for unmotivated students.

• Designated Super High School Programs

Parallel to the above reform, fresh attempts were being promoted. The following undertakings introduced are high-talent fostering projects with governmental funding. As a part of the structural reform, the *Super Science High School Program* and the *Super English Language High School Program* were started in 2002. And in 2003, the *Super Specialized High School Program* was also put into practice. In these programs, 178 super science high schools (continuing as of 2012), 169 super English language high schools (finished in 2009), and 32 super specialized high schools (data of 2009, continuing as of 2012) received governmental subsidies and conducted their own original experimental curriculum.¹⁹

These programs, without being bound by national curricula, can actively attempt partnerships between universities or local industries and also can promote international connections using ICTs. Their novel approach and objective of fostering excellent talents for the future were expected to have the effect of stimulating Japan’s educational system, which tends to pursue educational equality and uniformity.

3. Current Challenges

Now in 2012, the Central Education Council organized by MEXT continues further discussion

¹⁸ http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/hakusho/nc/t19950308001/t19950308001.html.

¹⁹ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/kokusai/gaikokugo/__icsFiles/afieldfile/2011/10/12/1293088_1.pdf
; http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/23/04/1304238.htm;
http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/houdou/21/07/1279582.htm.

for the total improvement of high school education. The main focus is how to guarantee the cultivation of whole students' key competencies. The followings are the two related issues.

3-1. Full Introduction of Career Education

In the midst of a structural recession, the employment situation of young people has gotten worse, and warnings about the NEET (youth not in education, employment, or training) problem have been raised. As mentioned above, upper secondary education links young people's way of life and with their future choices. And regardless of whether it is general, specialized or integrated, preparatory education from school to work has come to be the subject of great consideration.

Through criticism and reviewing of past career guidance, the career education that MEXT has laid out stands as "education aimed at cultivating a view of a career and work" and "building a competence base to become an independent working member of society by learning ways of living and learning." This education is to begin at the primary education level and progress in a spiral structure, depending on students' developmental stage²⁰.

Particularly, education at the high school level, learning contents of academic study, comprehensive project work, internships (trial work experience out of school or trial learning experience in universities), and career guidance are planned to be effectively organized for the purpose of career education.

Out of this trend, the "*Plan to Support Independence and Challenge of Youths*" came into operation from 2003, and under this framework some specialized high schools have also introduced *Japanese-style Dual System Experiments*²¹, which gained hints from Germany's vocational education.

With the Revision of *High School Course of Study* (national curriculum guidelines for high schools) (2009) the above career education programs are currently advancing along their practical stage, and on the findings of earlier practice, it is planned for whole high schools to implement them from April 2013.

Yet, there are still many challenges to overcome before national execution and fulfillment, such as curriculum administration in each high school and collaboration between high schools and

²⁰ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/ikusei/wakamono/index.htm;
<http://www.nier.go.jp/shido/centerhp/21%20kougou.career/kougou.panfu.htm>.

²¹ http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/shinkou/dual/05011401.pdf.

higher education institutions or local communities.

3-2. Making Upper Secondary Education Tuition-Free

OECD countries had already shown a common tendency towards tuition-free upper secondary education. But in Japan, it was implemented only just recently, after it was brought up as a manifesto of the Democratic Party. It was in April 2010 that the public high schools were officially made tuition-free. Details are as follows²².

- (1) In regard to public schools, tuition fees are covered by the national treasury through funding to prefectural or municipal governments. This includes all public high schools, the upper secondary sections of 6-year secondary education schools, public special-needs high schools, and public specialized training colleges. Exemptions to this subsidy are admission fees, textbook costs and other expenses.
- (2) In the case for each student attending private or national schools, the public high school standard tuition fee of 118,800 Japanese Yen per year will be issued from the “*High School Enrollment Support Fund*” to each school through prefectural governments. The difference between the standard and actual tuition fees will be collected from the students’ household.

The amount of subsidy can be adjusted for each household’s financial status, with low-income families receiving more support. If a family’s annual income is between 2.5 million JPY and 3.5 million JPY, the amount of subsidy would be 1.5 times as much; if it falls below 2.5 million, the subsidy would be twice as much.

High school enrollment rates in Japan have already reached their peak, so there will not be a great change in those numbers despite this measure. But instead, this policy can also bring help to those who were forced to abandon or drop out of upper secondary education for financial reasons. It can also reduce the number of youths who stand at a natural disadvantage in employment prospects. However, there are still some issues to be overcome, such as securing a sufficient national budget and whether to expand the financial support to cover international or ethnic high schools, which are not counted as formal schools in Japan.

²² http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/mushouka/;
<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/elsec/1303524.htm>.

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日本の後期中等教育（記述の要点）

日本の後期中等教育は、20 世紀後半に飛躍的な量的発展をとげるが、同時に多様化政策を進め、国民と産業界双方からのニーズに答えようとしてきた。ここでは、後期中等教育を担う諸学校・諸課程の設置状況をまず概観し、戦後教育改革で誕生した新制高校を中心に、その歴史的発展と諸改革、現在直面する課題について取り上げる。

1. 日本における後期中等教育の展開

1948 年発足した新制高校は、第 2 次世界大戦前の中学校、高等女学校、実業学校が改組再編されたもので、当初、国民の誰にも開かれた小学区制・総合制・男女共学を原則としたが、前二者は実施には至らなかった。50-60 年代には職業教育課程ならびに勤労青年の就学機会（定時制・通信制等）が拡大された。

高校進学率の急増期には、私立学校が生徒数受け入れの 3 分の 1 のシェアを占めるようになった。また生徒のプロフィールの多様化と高度経済成長に伴い、政府は学科設置の整備拡充に努め、職業課程の細分化を図った。しかしながら国民側の高学歴志向、普通教育志向は、進学競争を激化させた。この結果、高校序列化がみられるようになり、底辺となった職業高校への不本意入学問題や、受験ストレスによる不適応問題なども生じている。

2. 70～90 年代に進められた高校教育改革

以上への対応として 70 年代以降、高校教育改革が中央教育審議会はじめ自治体や教員団体等さまざまなレベルで論議された。そこで出された諸改革案は、90 年代に入って以降、以下のような形で実現した。(1) 中高一貫制の導入；(2) 高校における単位制の実施；(3) 総合課程の導入；(4) 職業高校の専門高校への改称；(5) スーパーハイスクール指定事業など特色のある実践。この結果、高校教育はかつての競争による序列化とは異なった、生徒自身の進路選択に資する教育の多様化・柔軟化へとシフトしている。

3. 現段階の課題

現在の高校改革の焦点は、すべての生徒のコンピテンシー育成の保障に向かっている。

2009 年の高校学習指導要領改訂に伴って、全高校で実施されることとなったキャリア教育は、「勤労観・職業観をはぐくむ教育」、「生き方・学び方を学び、社会的に自立する能力をつける学習」のことで、教科学習・総合的な学習活動、インターンシップやボランティア活動、ガイダンス等を通して実施されるこれには、各学校での教育課程の調整管理や高校と大学・地域社会や産業界との連携といった課題が存在する。

また、高校教育の無償化は、民主党政権がマニフェストに掲げて以来検討され、2010 年 4 月から全国の公立学校で正式に導入された。これには、財源確保や保障範囲の拡大といった諸課題が存在する。無償化は、家庭の経済状況によって高校教育をあきらめるケースを救済し、若者が労働市場で不利な立場に追い込まれることの防止に相当程度貢献している。